

# Ways of Being: Feminist Activism and Theorizing at the Global Feminist Dialogues in Porte Alegre, Brazil, 2005

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## Abstract

This article attempts to capture some reflections by an African feminist scholar and activist on the activism and academic debate at the Global Feminist Dialogues (FD) in Porte Alegre, Brazil in January 2005. The activism and the space for dialogue is a *feminist space* that includes different types of feminism, but is also a space that attempts to build a movement within diverse feminist networks. This form of activism is contrasted with the depoliticization of activism caused by gender mainstreaming in Africa. The academic debate at the FD takes place in the intersections between activism and theorizing and opens a space for discussing the politics of the body, the problems of strategizing and the problems of translation of the local to the global, as well as the creation of strategies for action.

*Keywords:* Global Feminist Dialogues, body politics, activism

## Introduction

I attended the Global Feminist Dialogues in Porte Alegre in Brazil in 2005 as a South African feminist academic and activist who has an interest in feminist theorizing and the intersections between activism and theory. This was my first time at the World Social Forum (WSF) and the FD. In this article, I reflect on my experiences of the activism at the FD but also try to capture some of the academic debate that informed theorizing at the FD. This should be viewed as the reflections of a South African, living on the African continent, a continent that is often at the receiving end of the negative effects of globalization.

## What are the Feminist Dialogues?

The Feminist Dialogues can be viewed as a “corrective” to the male dominated space of the World Social Forum (WSF). While women have constituted huge numbers of the WSF delegates for the more recent social fora, their concerns and interests are not integrated into the core of the WSF discussions (Jones: 1). The FD aims to celebrate women’s diversity and to act on issues that have an impact on women’s lives. Women taking part in the FD consider the WSF an important forum for social transformation and consider it important that the feminist agenda be integrated into the WSF. The FD as a process tries to work against the exclusion of women’s interests from the WSF. Feminists involved in the FD hope to intervene in the broader WSF process and forge strategic and political links with other social movements (Jones: 2).

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It is important to understand that the FD is a process and not just an event. As Lydia Alpizar has put it:

For me the FD is one space where, as feminist organizations and movements, we are coming together to reflect upon the great challenges we are facing today, and together, explore ways of becoming stronger, more effective and relevant in key political arenas (Jones: 4).

The process is therefore multi-dimensional such as collecting signatures, conducting letter writing campaigns, interviews and live broadcasts through the internet (Jones: 4).

The FD Coordinating group includes the following organizations and networks: Isis International (Manila), Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), INFORM (Sri Lanka), Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WIJEC), Articulacion Feminista de Mercosur (AFM Latin America and Caribbean) African Women's Development and Communication Network, FEMNET (Africa) and the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups (NNAWG India).

### **What is the Nature of the Activism at the FD?**

In order to nurture the diversity of the feminists from a broad range of backgrounds who attend, the FD is not prescriptive in what the outcomes or guiding principles should be. Discussions are very open-ended and, therefore, the FD is considered a *process* and not an event that would result in common political action.

But it is also a space for critical minded feminists who still believe in the political project of movement building, even if the understanding of movements is more fluid and full of diversities and contradictions [[feministdialogue.isiswomen.org](http://feministdialogue.isiswomen.org)](downloaded 24 October 2006).

Virginia Vargas (2005: 2) views the FD as a space of democratic dispute among movements, coalitions and networks that converge in that space, including the principles of transversal politics that start from the body and intersect with the struggles of countless other social movements, imbuing it with the promise of change.

The radicality of the politics here is the centrality of the body and this gives the FD a radical feminist appearance. Different regions give the FD space a specific "imprint." In Brazil, it is the energy that is associated with a certain passion and fearlessness of Latin America. In India it was a determination to create a separate space for dialogue and building a bridge between theory and activism. The space is therefore one of confluence and convergence – one of transversal politics in action.

In African countries operating under development policies put forward by the UN, World Bank, IMF and other International Monetary Institutions (IFIs), feminist activism has often been subdued or become mediated by NGOs. In South Africa, the women's activism that predated the 1994 election has become depoliticized due to women leaders moving into institutional politics (such as parliament) but also due to an official government policy of pursuing gender mainstreaming.

## Gender Mainstreaming vs. Feminist Activism

That the FD space was a *feminist* space took me by surprise because coming from the South (and, as is the case, from South Africa) I have gotten used to living with the notion that claiming the label of feminism is either frowned upon or passé, in a context where the concept of gender has become the more accepted concept to use.

In a country with a very racialized past, feminism is often viewed as a Western import or connected to middle class, privileged women, frequently women in the academy. Very often the transformative power of feminism (especially radical feminism) is mistaken for the exclusion of men by women who claim separate spaces. The discourse of gender that has increasingly started to focus on the construction of masculine identities has to a certain extent eclipsed the discourse of feminism in South Africa. Therefore finding myself in a feminist space was a welcome relief from the regular interventions into gender debates that are technocratic in nature due to gender mainstreaming.

Gender mainstreaming entered local contexts through international conferences and the development literature that is often applied to women in developing countries. The UN World Conferences for Women in Nairobi in 1985 and in Beijing in 1995 promoted the use of the concept gender mainstreaming. Later it was used by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (Gouws, 2005: 77). This discourse is disseminated globally through conferences, in the conditions of donor agencies, interpreted by experts across contexts, proliferated by researchers, policy-makers and bureaucrats and dispersed in sites of governance around the world (Manicom, 2001: 7).

Gender mainstreaming as a discourse but also as a policy practice is an attempt to integrate gender concerns in the everyday world of government procedures, policy-making and service delivery in order to create a woman-friendly state. True (2003) for example has argued that three enabling factors have put gender mainstreaming on policy agendas: (1) the language of promoting women's rights and gender equality, (2) the proliferation of women's networks and transnational linkages and (3) a growing number of gender sensitive women and men in foreign policy and global governance leadership positions. But somehow the transnational linkages have become less visible.

One of the consequences of gender mainstreaming is to institutionalise women's equality, but through the depoliticization of activism (direct action). Women's agency and the activism around women's issues become suppressed. Where the driving force behind feminism has been women's experience, mainstreaming turns it into a technocratic category for redress that also suppresses the difference between women (Gouws, 2005: 78). True (2003: 387) interprets the problem as one of too few links between gender advocates inside institutions and feminist activists and scholars outside. Women inside state machineries rely on technocratic procedures to institutionalise gender mainstreaming. These may include checklists through which policy makers can control whether attention has been paid to gender issues, or training courses in how to recognize gender interests and make them visible and the creation of indicators to monitor progress.

The official National Gender Framework of South Africa has incorporated gender mainstreaming as the most important tool to ensure that gender equality is implemented in the state<sup>2</sup>. This discursive framework calls for the integration of gender equality concerns into the analyses and formulation of all policies and programmes. Training

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<sup>2</sup> See the South African National Gender Framework and for a discussion see Gouws (2002)

packages based on the policy come complete with their technocratic discourse and tools of checklists and regular reporting around achievements. As Manicom (2001) has argued, the discourse of gender becomes constructed as a space that needs administrative intervention and gender “formulaic” solutions lose the substance of gender redress and could even support anti-feminist and undemocratic agendas.

Harcourt (2006) points out that gender mainstreaming was a phase in the engagement of the progressive global women’s movement with the United Nations (UN). It was an effort to engage the global development agenda and to produce a process of empowerment. Thus gender mainstreaming started out as something positive where, as she puts it:

...the global women’s rights movement aimed to empower women, change the gender bias and inequities in development policy and achieve gender justice...The global women’s rights movement took up each UN Conference in turn and gender mainstreamed it, as well as highlighting different regional specific needs. It was a highly organized and strategic process.

She points out how this process led to a small industry of proliferating NGOs, institutions comprised of gender experts and women’s networks closely attached to the UN. But as women started to understand the dangers of co-optation, feelings of frustration mounted and many started to resist. While there were many gains, the feminist struggle to a large extent became institutionalized. This led to another phase that Harcourt (2006:16) calls “joining the movement of movements” where activism was shifted to the transnational level of the World Social Forum, joining up with other social movements in a combined struggle against neo-liberal globalization, fundamentalism and militarization and war.

Harcourt’s (2006: 14) central argument about the different shifts in “women and development discourse” is about “biopower,” or body politics, or how women’s bodies are addressed during the different phases. The body politics include issues of gender violence, sexuality, reproductive rights and health – or to put it differently the “productive, reproductive and sexualized female body”.

In South Africa this second phase of joining up with transnational organizations is slow in coming. Very few women’s organizations have transnational linkages or organize on that level. In the conditions of technocratic gender management transnational organizing will repoliticize feminist debates and reenergize politics.

### **Reflections on Activism**

The energy of the FD space was invigorating because of the body politics but also because so many young feminists participated and were not reticent to claim the label of feminists. What was also encouraging was the participation of internationally known feminist scholars such as Sonia Alvarez, Virginia Vargas, Maxine Molyneux, Maria Betania Avila and Manisha Desai and younger feminist scholars such as Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca.

This energy was reflected in the march of all the groups that participated in the WSF at the opening of the WSF. Members of a women’s group who were protesting

violence against women marched in white wedding gowns stained red. Other feminists were marching with the big red cardboard lips with the slogan “Your mouth, fundamental against fundamentalisms – against Fundamentalisms, people are Fundamental!” (“Tu Boca Fundamental Contra los Fundamentalismos – Contra Los Fundamentalismos Lo Fundamental Es La Gente”).

While marching, this energy made me believe that other political options were indeed possible. The activism embodied in women’s bodies and presence in a space that has become characteristic of resistance against globalization reminded me of a past where feminists took the streets to demand justice. It also showed that solidarity across difference was possible, even if it was only very temporarily.

Very important were the small group discussions or what could be considered feminist consciousness raising groups, in which consciousness was raised about the diverse impacts of fundamentalism, militarism and neo-liberal economic policies but also about the diverse forms of resistance against these powers. As one of the delegates remarked, “fundamentalism is not against modernization but it is insecurity bred by globalization and in this regard it shares the same ideological values with the West that anti-globalization forces reject—that of being anti-democratic, monolithic and patriarchal.”

### **Reflections on Theorizing**

FD brings together feminists from all the different continents, the Caribbean and Japan. It therefore incorporates a diversity of feminisms, languages and beliefs. Process is the most important aspect that makes the dialogues work. Characteristic of the process is that it is participatory and open ended, that there is no fixed position on anything, only points of resonance. Central to this process are questions of strategizing and alliance building in conditions of diversity. To rephrase it—how do we build a movement out of such diverse networks? And on these issues theorization took place.

The themes of the FD of 2005 were neo-liberal globalization, fundamentalisms and militarization and war. In her opening paper Maxine Molyneux talked about the body as a symbol of nationalism, a commodity of sexual pleasure and masculine control. She also referred to the multitude of sites where globalization occurs that implicate women’s bodies such as reproductive rights, land rights and in personal spaces. She pointed out the care deficit that is picked up by women on top of the other burdens they already carry.

Johanna Kerr, director of AWID, called for a deepening of our analysis and a search for ways to strengthen and repoliticize our movements. She emphasized that we have to believe that another world is possible. Maria Betania Avila indicated a need to reflect on the body not only in terms of sexual and reproductive rights, but also on how the body is produced as a material base and as a metaphor.

What was refreshing about the feminist space at the FD was that the academic debate formed an integral part of the conversations at the plenaries, in the small groups and also in the informal spaces. Some of the discussions were concluded in the bar over caipirinhas. It was spontaneous theorizing that captured the spirit of the FD.

At the same time that globalization has opened spaces for resistance, it has contracted spaces for activism through the institutionalization of gender politics. Reflection on the meaning of politics has been a repeated request at the FD. And, the

question of how to build a radical feminist project in institutional spaces remains. We need ways of re-energizing women's politics in a variety of sites. As someone put it, "we need to think outside box and we need to think *about* the box."

The new methodologies of the FD are also aimed at shaping a space for feminism in the WSF, with a resultant increase of feminist presence over the past four years. A challenge that remains is how to create effective forms of organization. The synthesis at the end of day two included the following ideas: radical movements are losing their edge and becoming mainstream, to the extent that they cannot challenge the mainstream, which calls for a deepening of the analysis of institutions; we need to interrogate the social construction of women's bodies as well as the silencing of women's bodies; and, that while we are interrogating the agendas of fundamentalists we should be careful not to become fundamentalists ourselves.

Challenges that remained were how to maintain a rights-based agenda in the face of those who claim cultures and religions that reinforce women's subordinate positions as a counter force to globalization. Another challenge is building solidarity in the face of militarization that pits women against each other--such as is the case with Israel and Palestine. There is a need to develop collectivism without losing sight of particularity.

On the last day of the FD, there was a request made that those of us who were interested in feminist theoretical reflection should join a discussion after the last session.<sup>3</sup> Recurring themes and questions raised during that post-dialogue reflection centred on the FD as a space, the body as a site of struggle, and on exclusions and inclusion.

Our academic debate was aimed at informing theorizing around the space that the FD provides.<sup>4</sup> Questions were raised about the nature of the space and how it informs feminist understandings of the relationship between the WSF and the FD. The importance of the FD as a space for dialogue, reflection and deliberation that is unavailable in local contexts was emphasized, as well as the problem of translating different regional experiences into common understandings. Questions were also raised about who was left out of the FD. Who did not attend? Whose voices were being silenced?

The definition of politics was also interrogated as the question was asked if we are managing experience or giving experience a new meaning in a transnational context. It became clear that there was no common understanding of "transnational" and how to distinguish it from international. It became important to understand how and if the FD creates a "transnational feminist identity" and, if so, what political strategies should be linked to this identity. These questions were not answered but inform ongoing debates.

The sub-themes were also discussed—for example, what does fundamentalism mean or is it merely the lumping of different types of experiences with the free market, religion and violence, erasing regional (e.g., Latin American, Asian, African) understandings?

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<sup>3</sup> The participants in this discussion included Maxine Molyneux (UK), Manisa Desai (USA), Maria Betania Avila (Brazil), Gina Vargas (Peru), Norma Sanchis (Argentina), Vera Soares (Brazil), Martha Rosenberg (Argentina), Bice Maiguashca (UK), Sonia Alvarez (USA), Catherine Eschle (UK), Seiko Hanochi (Japan), Lucia Ariza (Argentina), Lisa McLaughlin (USA), Nada Hamid (Iraq), Amanda Gouws (South Africa), Svati Shah (USA), Ara Wilson (USA), Maureen Turnbull (USA), Fadwa Allabadi (Palestine), Brooke Ackerly (USA), Sonalini Sapra (USA) – a good distribution between North and South

<sup>4</sup> These reflections are based on notes taken by Ara Wilson who was the scribe at this discussion and my own notes. Thanks to Ara for making her notes available. The interpretations are my own.

As Virginia Vargas (2005: 4)<sup>5</sup> has pointed out one of the outstanding characteristics of the Forum is the need for self-reflection and for changing the way one thinks. As she has stated:

It is empowering to know that everyone is struggling for the same thing all over the world. It is enriching to know that the common causes of justice and liberty do not necessarily imply the same strategies, nor the same results... All of this permanently challenges the idea of universal solutions and unitary mindsets. And in turn enriches the horizon and complicates feminist strategies of transformation in the global-local arena.

But self-reflection is also connected to the meaning of solidarity. Is a certain type of solidarity constructed at the FD that cannot be sustained once everyone departs? The ways of being at the FD are connected to feminist imaginaries of a better world for women who are now trapped in pernicious globalizing processes. Ways of being are located in personal feminist identities forged through local struggles that at the FD need to be translated into global engagements.

### **Conclusion**

As the price for our entry into the global economy, the South African government accepted as its macro-economic policy the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). While GEAR increased economic growth it also exacerbated the gap between the rich and the poor. Women disproportionately bear the burden of poverty. While a transition to democracy provided the expectation that all citizens would be rights-bearing subjects, South Africa now bears the burden of the highest rape rate in the world—with an estimate of only 1 out of 9 rapes being reported and only a 7% conviction rate of those cases that go on trial. South Africa also has the highest infection rate by the HI virus in the world with more women being infected and more women dying of HIV/Aids than men. Gender based violence is common in many communities, with ill health and death increasing the care deficit.

What are directly implicated are the bodies of women through neo-liberal economic policies that exclude them from the formal economy, from decent education and health care. While this is not a country at war, the violence brought to bear on a population of women and children (and also on men) resembles a country at war (with itself).

In the first half of 2006 South African women bore silent witness to the rape trial of the ex-deputy-president, Jacob Zuma. During Zuma's trial for the alleged rape of an HIV positive woman, culture and custom were invoked (by women as well as men) to justify his behaviour, while the alleged victim was vilified and insulted by dancing supporters of Jacob Zuma, wearing t-shirts saying "100% Zulu boy", outside the court. The behaviour of Zuma and his supporters was outrightly rejected and strongly criticized by Bishop Desmond Tutu as well as by prominent South African feminist, Pregs

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<sup>6</sup> The page numbers may not match the page numbers of the article in *Development* since I used a pre-published version of the article.

Govender, who said in her speech on South African Women's Day (August 9) that the legacy of the Zuma trial will haunt us for a long time to come.

That feminists become despondent in these circumstances should not come as a surprise. But we need to make the global connections with what is happening locally. Solutions may therefore also stem from the global level. And this is what I found most useful about the FD – the understanding of “biopower” that puts women's bodies (and not the sanitized gender version where bodies become silenced) central, and the space to articulate a feminist understanding. The challenge is to put this understanding into coherent strategies. South African women's organizations will benefit from organizing transnationally. What is needed is a re-energizing of politics that is not mediated through organizations but direct action to show “biopower” in the African context.

From 5-9 August 2006, the preparations for the FD at the WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, 2007 took place in Nairobi. Whereas the first two FDs in 2004 and 2005 focused on deepening the analysis of globalization, fundamentalisms and militarism there will be a shift in 2007 to building and rebuilding feminist politics as a top priority. Two more sub-themes were included for 2007—that of feminist ways of working in different regions and global feminist strategies for addressing fundamentalisms, neo-liberal globalization and militarism. One of the members of the Coordinating Group (CG), Susanna George, indicated that there will be a stronger focus on strategies and political action founded on a strong analytical and theoretical base, and “less of a talk shop”. This should act as a catalyst for a revival of feminist organizing and strategizing and political action in different parts of the world [feministdialogue.isiswomen.org] (downloaded 24 October 2006). Three hundred women from all over the world are expected to participate in the FD from 17-19 January 2007 in Nairobi.

What will the African imprint on the FD be? With Afro-pessimism very often rife on the continent, the FD space will encourage hope and inspiration for a better world. But the hope does not have to remain on an abstract level. Since one of the sub-themes is that of building global feminist strategies, this FD meeting may be the beginning for women on the African continent to start building continental linkages to make women's activism visible and to demand gender justice in an unjust global world.

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